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ABSTRACT

Selections from world literature can increase high school students' interest in reading, their familiarity with age-old literary themes, their understanding of literary genres, their awareness of varying cultures, and their skill in analyzing and writing about literature. A world literature course with those aims introduced in a small Wisconsin high school focused on plays and novels dating from classical Greek literature to the present and including literature from Greece, England, Spain, France, Russia, Norway, and Italy. Because the class was composed of an exceptionally able group of students, methods of teaching included lectures, panel discussions, class discussions, students' reports, and student research papers. Full-length films, filmstrips, drama recordings, musical compositions, art slides, and theater productions provided supplementary material. Solicited student comments indicated varying levels of enthusiasm for the course. (JM)

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Teaching World Literature at the High School Level

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Literature in Academic High Schools
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When the young John Keats described the "realms of gold" through which he had traveled before reaching the awe-inspiring presence of Homer's "pure serene," he articulated what many of us feel when we are profoundly moved by a piece of literature. Although it is well over a century since Keats found such joy in reading a translation of Homer, I believe that young readers have not lost their ability to react strongly to literature. In this address I would like to illustrate my belief that one of the most important and lasting experiences we can offer high school English students today is the chance to discover some of the still shining gold of the past, the gold of Keats' western islands, to be found in reading the literature of the world.

Unfashionable though such an attitude may be in this era of the "turned-on," McLuhan-oriented adolescent, I believe there is still pleasure and excitement for our students in reading, yes, even in reading some works which were old during Keats' day. To help arouse such reactions, I submit that a course in classic and modern European and world literature should be offered at the high school level, because of the resulting benefits to the students and the teacher, intellectually, personally and emotionally. Little does it matter if the course be called World Literature, European Literature, Great Books, Classics of the Western World, titles which are currently being used. The important point is to introduce the students to the habit of reading worthwhile selections of literature other than the already familiar Anglo-American curriculum. Perhaps our students will not experience Keats' moment of silent awe, but perhaps they will.

Among the reasons for offering such a course can be included the

following pertinent objectives:

- 1) to develop in the students an awareness of the nature of comedy and tragedy as they were developed and refined through many years and countries;
- 2) to offer the students a chance to grapple with the age-old themes (man's relation to other men, to God, death, love, war, honor, power, etc.) as treated by serious writers throughout several thousand years of changing cultures;
- 3) to show the evolving of literary types, particularly drama and the novel;
- 4) to increase the students' skill in analyzing and writing about literature;

5) "to bring to our students an education for a multi-cultural world," as Mrs. Enid Olson states. She further explains, "World events are sweeping us along whether we like it or not and none of us can afford a provinciality or insularity even in our literary consciousness."

finally, to increase our students' interest in reading, so they may continue to seek more "realms of gold" throughout their lives.

Lest the above objectives sound like so much academic Utopia, I wish to describe my experiences in planning and teaching a world literature course at a small high school, about seven hundred students, located in central Wisconsin. I readily admit that my experiences are neither unique nor authoritative, but perhaps a description of some of the failures and successes will help you avoid problems if you are contemplating the establishment of such a course. Perhaps I can also show that even an isolated, rural school can offer some sophistication and enrichment to its students.

The need for a world literature course became increasingly evident to me during three years of teaching English literature to the college-bound seniors. Not only did they lack a knowledge of foreign literature and mythology, thus failing to understand literary allusions, but they also had no chronological sense of literary types, thinking, for example, that the novel had always existed in its present form. Because of its size, the school only offered two years of Latin and two years of Spanish, with the emphasis primarily on grammar, in the former case, and conversation, in the latter. A sampling of popular myths, a smattering of Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic Wars, a portion of Don Quixote and El Cid, both greatly simplified and modernized, were the only foreign works studied in four years of high school language courses. Seldom were more than one hundred-fifty students enrolled in all the language courses in any one year. Usually the number was smaller. During the last school year nine students were enrolled in a second-year Spanish class. Thus the need for a course which offered some foreign literature to larger numbers of students became apparent to members of the English department, several of whom had studied foreign literature in college and recognized its many values for students of English and American literature.

The aims of the course, as developed by two of us from the English department, were broad, as we attempted to include both a wide range of geographical distribution and a broad chronological spectrum. Besides our personal tastes, several sources were of great help in choosing approximately twenty basic works from the infinite possibilities. A Reading List for College-Bound High School Students, published by the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, Clifton Fadiman's Lifetime Reading Plan, One Hundred Books, published by the New York Public Library,

Books for You, prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English, and the catalogues of paperback books offered by many publishers provided the most help. It is a curious and unfortunate fact that little help was to be found in five years of articles in the English Journal. No more than half a dozen articles from 1960 to 1965 were concerned with world literature as a topic, and none offered practical suggestions for implementing such a course. (Only after the class was already planned did we become aware of Mrs. Enid Olson's very sound remarks about "Teaching World Literature," in the January, 1965 Issue of Wisconsin English Journal.)

Thus we were forced to rely on certain arbitrary principles of selection. Among the guiding criteria were availability in paperback, as we disliked the rigidity and fragmentation of anthologies, variety of comedy and tragedy, place and time, economy, and most important, works which were within the interest and ability of college-bound juniors and seniors.

The final list submitted to the principal and the business office included the following works: Edith Hamilton's Mythology; Eight Great Tragedies; Eight Great Comedies; The Genius of the Early English Theater (which we considered vital in a study of the development of drama, even though we had previously decided to omit works written in English); Cyrano de Bergerac; Becket; Les Miserables; Don Quixote; Four Great Russian Short Novels and The Little World of Don Camillo.

I might add that the total amount spent per student was about seven dollars, somewhat more than a hard-cover anthology. But the use of paperback books was one of the most-liked features of the course, according to students' comments at the end of the semester. In addition, the introductions and editors' comments offered the students a variety of interpretations of

the literature, a situation which would not be possible with one anthology. Another unexpected benefit arose from the fact that other paperbacks by the same author were often available, so that many students continued their reading of favorite authors, especially Sophocles, Ibsen, Shaw, Moliere, Anouilh and Guareschi. During the second year I taught the course I did add Three Plays by Ibsen, but none of the original books needed replacing, a tribute to the students' regard for paperback editions.

It is immediately apparent that our final list included only drama and novels, a choice partly influenced by the limitations of the one semester allowed for the course. Poetry was eliminated because we felt that plays and novels were more easily translated from the original language. We also felt better prepared to handle the larger works, feeling that relatively few English teachers, except those with foreign language training, are prepared to teach non-English poetry in translation. Our final curriculum was also determined by the available supplementary material, particularly audio-visual, and by the resource material available in the high school and public libraries.

The course calendar was finally set as follows: mythology, basic for an understanding of any literature, two weeks; Greek drama, including Oedipus Rex and Aristotle's theory of tragedy, plus a choice of The Clouds or Prometheus Bound, two weeks; medieval English drama, Everyman and Doctor Faustus, a week and a half; Moliere's The Miser and Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, a week and a half; Uncle Vanya and Russian Drama, one week; Ibsen's Doll's House, one week; Shaw's Arms and the Man, one week; Becket by Jean Anouilh, one week. The drama portion of the course was originally planned to take about ten weeks, but almost twelve weeks were needed, as indicated above. The novels which we selected for the

second half of the course included Hugo's Les Miserables, Don Quixote (whom the students dubbed Don Quick Shot), Turgenev's First Love, The Gambler by Dostoevsky, and Master and Man by Tolstoy. The above novels required approximately six weeks, leaving Giovanni Guareschi's The Little World of Don Camillo for the last week of school, a fortuitous choice for the end of the school year, with its subtle blend of political commentary and humor. The above schedule also included time allotted for tests, films, records and lectures to bridge the gaps of chronology and style. Throughout the semester I also gave lectures on literature not studied in class, such as Latin literature, the Divine Comedy, the literature of India and modern African writing.

Of course many other selections could have been chosen for study from the almost infinite variety. Many of you may regret that a favorite work has been omitted, one you consider vital in understanding world literature. For example, Oriental and Indian literature, South American and African literature should all be studied in a serious consideration of world literature. But one would need an unlimited budget, equally unlimited preparation time, basic knowledge of the writings from formal course work or private study, and at least two semesters instead of the one granted at my school. Such a millenium has not yet arrived. If I were allowed to expand the course, however, several exciting possibilities exist. Paperback anthologies of Chinese and Japanese short stories are available, and two very good paperback books on Africa, African Heritage and Modern Poetry from Africa, are published in this country. Some of the modern African novels, like Things Fall Apart and Child of Two Worlds, are also published in Penguin paperback, although they might be difficult to obtain in quantity. Certainly the pre-convention group

which studied the literature of the Pacific and Asia would be able to include such material in present or future world literature courses. As far as I know, however, little is available in paperback from South America or India, though both areas have produced Nobel winners in literature during the last twenty or thirty years. Furthermore, Israel, Germany, Australia, Iceland, Persia and modern Greece all have literary works which could be profitably and pleasurably studied. The longer one teaches the course the more tempted one is to be like the United Nations and keep adding new countries.

But the temptation to include material from as many countries as possible creates the problem of maintaining some sort of coherence and organization in the course. Novels, plays, short stories and poetry, biography and other non-fiction can turn a regular literature course into a series of unconnected fragments, even though everything is American or British. If the selections also come from ten or twelve different countries, covering a span of three thousand years, even the best students will derive only haphazard knowledge, in spite of our efforts to teach a unified course. Therefore I sincerely recommend, at the risk of leaving out some good and important works, limiting the course by some arbitrarily chosen standards, much as we limited our class to belletristic material, specifically novels and drama. Depending, of course, on the teacher's preference and preparation, the course could be limited by genre, by chronology, by themes, by countries and geographical area, or by any other workable standards.

Two other existing considerations in choosing the material for the course are the relative sophistication of the student body, which can exclude certain works immediately, and the ethnic composition of the

school district. To illustrate the first point, one class had little understanding and sympathy for Don Quixote, constantly wondering, as they said, "how an old man could be so silly." One girl wrote, "Don Quixote was the biggest pain. I'll never understand why it isn't thrown out or burned." A Classmate commented, "Don Quixote was the longest, most boring and hardest of the works. I think some other Spanish literature should replace it unless a condensed or modernized version should ever become available." (They were already using a condensed modern translation!) The second point, the ethnic composition of the school district, could possibly alter the content if pressure groups are influential in determining school policy, an unfortunate situation which sometimes exists in small communities. Several parents from the predominantly German community, for example, were upset to see no German material included in the course, and others were worried that the French selections might be too "sophisticated," meaning immoral, for high school students. Fortunately both groups were pleased with the completed course and offered no further complaints, although I did not change the selections.

Assuming, then, that the books have been carefully selected by a group of teachers, one of them will have to be delegated to teach the course. No one person, obviously, is qualified to teach Greek, French, Spanish, Norwegian, Russian and Italian literature equally well, especially if the course is to include necessary background information on the author and his milieu. But certain guidelines can be offered. The teacher should have some knowledge of the countries being studied, preferably through personal travel, but at the very least through reading. An acquaintance with art and music can help show the tremendous influence of literature on the other arts. Knowledge of history and philosophy,

particularly ancient Greece, medieval England, sixteenth century Spain, and nineteenth century Russia, France and Scandinavia, will make lectures effective and authoritative, even though the information is acquired in a sort of crash course. Above all, the teacher must be sufficiently interested and enthusiastic about the subject to do the extra research and preparation which the successful course requires.

In attempting to meet some of the above standards, I soon found that the high school librarian was my best ally, gladly recommending source books for me and ordering what the library lacked, especially critical analyses and commentaries. Of course one cannot expect miracles. The librarian must be consulted well in advance so library resources will be adequate for any outside reading which may become necessary for the students. In larger cities the public library may also be a fruitful source of material for the teacher, especially if audio-visual aids can be borrowed. Though a great deal of work is required to be well-prepared for such a class, the satisfaction is proportionately great. In fact, it was one of the fringe benefits of this course that the teacher learned more than the students.

After two years of teaching such a course, I have come to several conclusions about selecting students to participate. Yes, I believe there should be certain prerequisites for the students because of the difficulty of several selections. Oedipus Rex, Don Quixote, A Doll's House, Prometheus Bound and Doctor Faustus are works which have sophisticated themes, meaningful only to relatively mature students. The length of the reading assignments also dictates that the students be above average in reading ability. Therefore, when we instituted the course, we offered it as an elective to juniors and seniors with at least a B-average in English. Generally the students who asked to enroll met the

qualifications with ease. In the case of a few who did not have the required average, recommendations from past English teachers were necessary. As a result of the standards, an exceptionally able group of students composed the first class.

The ability of the students in large measure dictated the methods I used in teaching the course, a combination of lectures, panel discussions, whole class discussions, students' reports and a research paper. Occasional quizzes kept most students up to date with the reading, and essay exams revealed the extent to which the classroom material was being synthesized; usually I gave essay exams on two or more works so comparison and contrast could show me how well the student had understood Greek drama, or the differences between Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dostoevsky in characterization and theme.

The most popular classroom method, and the most interesting, was discussion groups, a technique which I used twice during the semester. Originally I had decided to use group discussions in addition to an essay exam, but the success of the first group convinced me that the students learned a great deal from each other. Therefore an exam would be dull, superfluous and time-consuming. Because the groups worked so well, I would like to explain the process in detail. Perhaps you have devised a better system for group discussions, but for me it was an exciting innovation. The class was divided into five groups of six students, with at least one "talker" and one "silent-type" in each group, plus a fairly equal distribution of junior/senior, boy/girl, intelligent/average. Each group was thus roughly equal to each other, with close friends usually separated. I appointed a chairman and a recorder, usually a quiet but capable student as chairman and a more aggressive type as recorder, so he would be too busy jotting down ideas to dominate

the discussion. The plan did succeed, with balanced participation from each group. Although the whole process took six days, the time was well spent.

On the first day I distributed a list of the groups, with the assigned question, chairman and recorder. The rest of that period was spent in noisy, often argumentative, discussion, with the recorder busily making notes of interesting ideas and conclusions for presenting to the whole class. Fortunately at that hour there was an empty classroom next door, so two groups met there. I circulated from group to group, as consultant, mediator, resource person, but seldom as disciplinarian. The students were far too engrossed in determining the ruling passion of Doctor Faustus or the nature of the comedy in The Clouds to think of misbehaving, although I was sometimes in the next room. When the class presentations began the next day, each group needed a complete class period to discuss the assigned question, with lively class participation at the end of the prepared talks. So stimulating were the discussions that I regret not having a tape recorder in the room.

Part of the continued enthusiasm of the class was engendered by the supplementary materials I was able to find during the two years. Many of these are easily available to any English teacher--full-length films of Don Quixote, Les Miserables, the Encyclopedia Britannica series on ancient Greece and Oedipus, a very useful film, Russia: Insights Through Literature, and filmstrips of many of the literary works. Many other excellent films were beyond the range of my thirty-dollar rental budget, but large city libraries often have free film rentals, especially of older movies. Excellent records have been made of Cyrano de Bergerac, the Greek plays, A Doll's House, Uncle Vanya and Everyman. To my great

delight, last year the Richard Burton Oxford performance of Doctor Faustus became available on records, adding immeasurably to the students' appreciation of "Marlowe's mighty lines." The forthcoming movie should delight them even more than the record. Commercial movies occasionally reinforced the content of the course, when War and Peace appeared on television, and Becket and Doctor Zhivago appeared at nearby theaters. After seeing the emotional power of Russian literature as portrayed on the screen, the students had more incentive to read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, which they had somewhat dreaded. Finally, an interesting result of studying Doctor Faustus occurred when the students saw the musical Damn Yankees on television. Easily recognizing the manipulation of the Faust theme, they greatly preferred Marlowe's version of the legend.

Several profitable class periods were spent in hearing musical compositions related to the literature: Berlioz' Damnation of Faust, ballet music from Faust, Man of La Mancha, 1812 Overture and other Russian compositions, and songs from The Chocolate Soldier, the musical version of Shaw's Arms and the Man. We also viewed filmstrips and slides of art works inspired by or from the same era as the literature. My collection of Kenneth Rexroth's Saturday Review series of Classics Revisited also allowed the students to read intelligent contemporary discussions of many pieces of world literature, sometimes inspiring them to explore authors not studied in class. Saturday Review also featured contemporary European literature in the column "European Literary Scene," which I sometimes read to the class.

The most enjoyable supplementary material for the course was the opportunity to see plays at nearby colleges, at little theater presentations, and at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Although it was a two-hour trip

to Milwaukee, students managed to see The Miser, Cyrano de Bergerac and The Trojan Women. Almost any large community offers comparable or better opportunities, often at reduced student rates if the teacher is willing to make the necessary arrangements. But the student response is well worth any inconvenience. As one girl said, "I didn't know Moliere was so funny just from reading in class. He's a riot!" High praise indeed from a sixteen year old fan of the Monkees!

Such a class is not all success, of course, as the students critically observed in a questionnaire completed last summer. Many of them felt that the required thirty or forty pages of daily reading was a burden, especially when they read Don Quixote. Lack of time, in fact, was mentioned by most students as the greatest weakness of the course, followed closely by unprepared students. Some of the students also noted that the course could have had a different type of organization, "perhaps country by country." Observed one student, "Thus one could compare works from the same country as well as from other countries." Another student wrote, "It (this course) was interesting because we could see how writing developed, but I found it a little mixed up because we'd take early Greek and skip to middle French and we missed the idea of how literature in a certain country developed." One girl commented from the perspective of one year of college, "As high school students I don't think we took the course as something that would be of great value in the future." Another student remarked, "The panel discussions were mediocre. Students could concentrate just one area of the selection and discussion could be led by one or two." The same student disliked "the varying levels of enthusiasm within our particular class." Finally, students wished for certain omitted

works. The Divine Comedy, or at least The Inferno, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, Faust in addition to Doctor Faustus, German literature, including Freud, more Italian literature, a long Russian novel instead of three short ones, some works of non-fiction, Slavic, Oriental, South American and African literature--all of these were mentioned as possible additions or replacements. All the students felt the same sense of inadequacy I felt, that we had only begun our study of world literature when the course was over.

It is impossible to measure the ultimate worth of such a class, but some of the students' remarks illustrate a few of the immediate benefits. "I do think the course was the start of my becoming aware of what literature has to offer." "I just loved Don Quixote and his hilarious antics. I even met a girl at work who reminds me of Dulcinea del Toboso." "I have a little more confidence for English courses at college. I will be able to draw more comparisons and make more references." "The use of records, slides and magazine articles as further references to the setting or the author added greatly to one's comprehension of a particular era in literature." "My basic background knowledge of some of the best literary works put me ahead of most students and saved hours of time at college." "I've found that college history and psychology classes refer to literature from all over the world as sort of a unifying link." "The course made me realize that I could understand and enjoy something with depth, such as the Greek plays." "I really impressed my history prof." "The humor and sentimentality of Cyrano de Bergerac made life seem noble to me. Whether things go right or wrong, Cyrano de Bergerac makes it all seem worthwhile."

And such student reactions, ranging from the cynical response about impressing the prof to the profound comment about the function of

of literature as a "unifying link" show that teaching such a course is worthwhile. Modern high school students can be moved, though perhaps not as spectacularly as John Keats was, by their traveling through world literature to the "realms of gold" which wait at the end of the trip. I invite you to share the adventure.